

THE JESUIT AND PATRISTIC SPIRITUALITY IN KARL RAHNER'S SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. In the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner's life and work, philosophy, spirituality and systematic theology are harmonized for the benefit of the increasingly desacralized and secularized man of the late modernity. Familiarization with the great world's philosophers, from Plato to Aristotle up to Blondel and Heidegger, with Ignatian spirituality and with the Eastern and Western Fathers of the Church decisively helped Rahner in his endeavour to free the Catholic theology from the "captivity" of scholastic rationalism and objectivism and to redirect it "existentially", by a genuine turn, from an abstract God, isolated in the transcendent and irrelevant for the Christian life, to the concrete man, "hearer of God's word". The spiritual experience of the most influential Catholic theologian of the 20th century was conveyed in an original way, by pastoral guidance, through lectures and his monumental work, on many generations of Catholic servants and believers. Setting out the Ignatian and Patristic sources of Karl Rahner's spiritual theology, this article outlines, against its background, the odyssey of yesterday's and today's Christian experience, at the same time emphasizing the profound ecumenical dimension of patristic spirituality.

Keywords: Karl Rahner, Jesuit, Spiritual Exercises, Ignatian spirituality, Church Fathers, existential experience

1. The Years of Jesuit Apprenticeship

Karl Rahner (1904-1984) became a member of the Jesuit Order on the 20th of April, 1922 in Feldkirche/Vorarlberg in Austria, when he had barely turned 18. During his two years of novitiate in Tisis (Austria), his attention was drawn by the life and spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and generally by the spiritual literature. His novitiate concluded by taking the monastic vows and by the publication by the young Ignatian of his first article:

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“Warum uns das Beten nottut” / “Why we need to pray”¹, in which he expressed his conviction that only in a state of prayer we have the possibility “to touch our Creator and Lord” (*ad attingendum Creatorem ac Dominum nostrum*).

Afterwards he studied philosophy at Tisis for three years and two more years at “Berchman” College² in Pullach (München), where he taught the History of Philosophy. In that period he became familiar with the thought of the great ancient and medieval philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas a.o., as well as with the thought of some Jesuit philosophers of early twentieth century, such as Pierre Rousselot (1878-1915) and Joseph Maréchal (1878-1944). Rahner admitted that the Belgian philosopher Maréchal exercised the most vivid and the strongest influence on him, that exceeded the influence of the famous philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).

During his studies of theology (1929-1933) at the Faculty of Theology within the private University of the Jesuit Order in Valkenburg (the Netherlands), the young Jesuit continued to be interested in the patristic spirituality and in the spirituality of Jesus’ heart, generally in mysticism and philosophy. His studies were followed by the tertianship (*das Terzia*) at Kärnten, in Austria, the last year of Jesuit novitiate, when the spiritual life deepened and the authenticity of vocation was verified for the last time.³

Rahner’s special interest in spirituality – maintained throughout his entire life – materialised in many works, grouped in eight of the 32 volumes

¹ Published in the *Leuchtturm* magazine 18 (1924–25), 310–311; republished in Karl Rahner, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1 (*KRSW 1-*), Karl Lehmann, Johann Baptist Metz, Karl Heinz Neufeld S.J. et al. (eds.), (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2008), 3-4.

² The Curriculum at this Jesuit College included: Logics and Theory of knowledge (1 semester); General metaphysics (1 semester); Cosmology (2 semesters); Metaphysic Psychology (2 semesters); Experimental Psychology (2 semesters); Theodicy (2 semesters); Ethics (2 semesters); History of philosophy (2 semesters); Physics and Chemistry (2 semesters); Biology (2 semesters); Pedagogy (1 semester); Hebrew (2 semesters); Physiology (1 semester); Rhetoric (2 semesters); Seminar of Ethics (1 semester); Homiletic exercises (4 semesters). Walter Kern, “Erste Philosophische Studien 1924–1927”, in Paul Imhof, Hubert Biallowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner: Bilder eines Lebens* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1985), 19.

³ Maria Keller, “Im Terziate 1933/1934”, in *Karl Rahner: Bilder eines Lebens*, 24: “As in the case of novitiate, in the centre were the four weeks of exercises, and at the end of tertianship other eight days of exercises. Life in St. Andrew was imbued with monastic atmosphere. People lived in a recluse way, everyone would look after himself and would use time to draft the lectures about the exercises. Rahner discussed with Fr. Lotz the plan for the publishing of a theology of the exercises or of a comment in this respect”.

that make up the *Sämtliche Werke / Complete Works*⁴ of the prolific theologian. Johann Baptist Metz made the remark that thanks to his master, popular and everyday mysticism (not elitist and esoteric) infused the concrete lay life of their contemporaries.⁵

2. Ignatian Spirituality in Rahner's Interpretation

Unlike the other great German-speaking Catholic theologian of the last century, the Swiss Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner remained a Jesuit all his life:

“For more than 60 years, the Jesuit Order was the spiritual homeland and the universe where father Rahner lived. The Jesuit spirituality marked his life. His transcendental-philosophical reflections are ultimately not the core of his theology; they are only its profile (*Gestalt*). The existential spring he drank from was, actually, experiencing the spiritual exercises, which he seldom shared and only among his friends. The references relative to Jesus' life, mentioned in the book of ignatian *Exercises*, formed the fundamental substrate from which Karl Rahner started to preach God's life giving Word”.⁶

Becoming a Jesuit, Rahner had no intention to be a specialist in philosophy or a professor of theology, but he wished to be a confessor, a priest, a monk, always ready to be sent on a mission anywhere in the world.⁷ Spirituality and mission had been at the core of his Jesuit training, as well as in the centre of his theological concerns. Therefore, Rahner's theology is grounded in the Jesuit spirituality, where he always drew his energy from. His work is, to a great extent, the fruit of the experience acquired at the school of Ignatius of Loyola and the *Spiritual Exercises*. One must look here for the “matrix” of his thinking, the key that opens the access to the understanding of

⁴ vol. 1: *Frühe spirituelle Texte und Studien* (2014); vol. 3: *Spiritualität und Theologie der Kirchenväter* (1999); vol. 7: *Der betende Christ. Geistliche Schriften zur Praxis des Glaubens* (2013); vol. 13: *Ignatianischer Geist. Schriften zu den Exerzitien und zur Spiritualität der Ordensgründer* (2006); vol. 14: *Christliches Leben. Aufsätze – Betrachtungen – Predigten* (2006); vol. 23: *Glaube im Alltag. Schriften zur Spiritualität und zum christlichen Lebensvollzug* (2006); vol. 25: *Erneuerung des Ordenslebens* (2008); vol. 28: *Geistliche Schriften. Späte Beiträge zur Praxis des Glaubens* (2007).

⁵ See J. B. Metz, “Apprendre à croire”, in K. Rahner, *Le courage de théologien*, dialogues publiés par P. Imhof et H. Biallowons (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 14-15.

⁶ P. Imhof, H. Biallowons, “Vorwort”, in *Karl Rahner: Bilder eines Lebens*, 6.

⁷ See *KRSW* 25, 92.

his profound, varied and topical work.⁸ Here as well is to be found also, as a matter of fact, the purpose of his theology, namely to find God in all and in everything, in order to preach Him to everybody, so that He may be glorified by all the people.

According to Rahner, in Ignatius of Loyola three different lines of thought are conjoined: the medieval Christian tradition, the modern thought (characterized by the issues of subjectivity and freedom) and the modern thought on existence. These three lines are represented, from the philosophical perspective, by Thomas Aquinas, I. Kant and M. Heidegger.⁹

In the Jesuit existential background lie also the other sources of Rahner's thinking, but, compared to the philosophy and the theology which inspired him, the Ignatian spirituality was much more important.¹⁰ And it was more important, first of all, for the primacy granted to the mystical "existential experience", and, implicitly, to the "existential knowledge". Because, for the German theologian, Ignatius of Loyola was "a leading existentialist", from whom he learned that theology is based on experiencing the divine life mystically: "For me, in my theology it is of a fundamental importance to have an authentic, genuine experience of God and His Spirit. It logically precedes (but not necessarily in time) reflection and theological verbalism".¹¹

This "existential experience" of the Living God in prayer and meditation brings that concrete "existential knowledge", in which God and man embrace each other mystically. In this knowledge, man's endeavour and the Lord's grace, man's work and God's work, the natural and the supernatural blend together. Starting from the "phenomenology" of God's actual presence in the

⁸ See Bernard Sesboué, *Karl Rahner* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 35-36; Harvey D. Egan, "Der Fromme von morgen wird ein 'Mystiker' sein", in H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Wagnis Theologie. Erfahrungen mit der Theologie Karl Rahners* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1979), 100; Egan, "Theology and spirituality", in D. Marmion, M. Hinnes (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13-14. About the model Ignatius of Loyola and about his importance in Rahner's training wrote Arno Zahlaue extensively in *Karl Rahner und sein 'produktives Vorbild' Ignatius von Loyola* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1996).

⁹ See Karlheinz Ruhstorfer, "Das moderne und das postmoderne Interesse an den Geistlichen Übungen des Ignatius von Loyola", *Theologie und Philosophie* 73 (1998), 359.

¹⁰ "Aber die Spiritualität des Ignatius selbst, die wir durch die Praxis des Gebetes und eine religiöse Bildung mitbekamen, ist für mich wohl bedeutsamer gewesen als alle gelehrte Philosophie und Theologie innerhalb und außerhalb des Ordens" / "But I think that the spirituality of Ignatius himself, which one learned through the practice of prayer and religious formation, was more significant for me than all learned philosophy and theology inside and outside the order." (*KRSW* 31, 180-181); See also William Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London: Continuum, 2000), 6.

¹¹ P. Imhof, H. Biallowons (eds.), *Karl Rahner im Gespräch*, II (München: Kösel, 1983), 257; See also *KRSW* 31, 321.

world (*Gott in Welt*) and in man, through His self-communication (*Selbstmitteilung Gottes*) in grace and in Jesus Christ, Karl and his older brother, Hugo (1900-1968), a Jesuit himself too, were very early interested in the “existential knowledge”, since the period of their collaboration for deepening the Jesuit spirituality and theology.¹²

On the existential knowledge of God in Ignatian manner, Rahner wrote a major study with the title “Die Ignatianische Logik der existentiellen Erkenntnis”¹³ / “The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola”, to which he would often make reference when he was requested to initiate someone in his theology. In this existential knowledge, derived from the intense and direct experience of God, has been seen the origin of Rahner’s philosophy and transcendental theology. Probably that is why Johann B. Metz proclaimed this work as “great and unique”, and Martin Maier reckoned that its influence would also outlive the 20th century.¹⁴

Rahner was sure that the Ignatian work *Spiritual exercises* is among the major works of Christianity and, like all the major creations, it should be re-read and reinterpreted in the religious and cultural context offered by each historical era, being a permanently fresh source of inspiration and teaching for the theology and generally for the Christian experience. “By the term ‘Spiritual Exercises’ is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities.” (*Exercises* 001)¹⁵

Used as a spiritual guide for the instruction by the spiritual advisor (“the master”), the spiritual exercises are conducted throughout a period of four weeks, in accordance with the four parts of the homonymous work.¹⁶ Through them, the disciple comes to love and serve God in all and to be ready

¹² On the collaboration of the two Jesuit brothers and on its fruit, see Hugo Rahner, “Eucharisticon Fraternitas”, in J. B. Metz (ed.), *Gott in Welt. Festgabe für Karl Rahner*, II (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1964), 895-899. A professor of Patrology at the University of Innsbruck, Hugo Rahner was deemed one of the most competent exegetes of Ignatius of Loyola.

¹³ Originally published in F. Wulf (ed.), *Ignatius von Loyola: Seine geistliche Gestalt und sein Vermächtnis* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1956), 343-405; republished in *Das Dynamische in der Kirche* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1958), 74-148 and in *KRSW* 10, 368-420.

¹⁴ See Martin Maier, “La Théologie des Exercices de Karl Rahner”, *Recherches de science religieuse* 79 (1991), 538.

¹⁵ St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Louis J. Puhl S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951).

¹⁶ “Four Weeks are assigned to the Exercises given below. This corresponds to the four parts into which they are divided, namely: the first part, which is devoted to the consideration and contemplation of sin; the second part, which is taken up with the life of Christ our Lord up to Palm Sunday inclusive; the third part, which treats of the passion of Christ our Lord; the fourth part, which deals with the Resurrection and Ascension.” (*Exercises* 004)

anytime to be sent anywhere, because “he will see God present and active anywhere”. This way, he will become a “contemplative in action”.¹⁷

According to the Ignatian logic, hermeneutically captured by Rahner, the existential knowledge – that has its grounds in the inward revelation of God in man’s soul, through the act of inspiration – is not identical to the rational, deductive knowledge, mediated by the senses, nor merely to faith; is not, however, identical either to the direct, unmediated knowledge (*visio beata*), which is a specific feature of the age to come. A partaker of this knowledge is the man who seeks to fulfil God’s will in the concrete events of life. In the existential knowledge emphasis is not so much on the actual act of knowledge, but on the act of freedom and of free choice.¹⁸ But, nevertheless, the existential knowledge of the divine will is not the fruit of man’s effort, but is a gift of the divine grace. However, it is possible also thanks to the fact that man is endowed with the gift of receiving God’s revelation, is a “hearer of the Word” (*Hörer des Wortes*), “event of God’s self-communication” (*das Ereignis der Selbstmitteilung Gottes*) and “being of transcendence” (*das Wesen der Transzendenz*) that is in a dynamic openness toward God, the absolute Transcendence.

There are three moments, according to the *Spiritual Exercises*, when God’s will can be recognized and chosen: a) when God moves and attracts the believer’s will unto Himself; b) when the soul receives enough light and knowledge – through the experience of comfort and desolation and by the wisdom of discerning of spirits; c) when the person, fully at ease, reflects on the purpose for which he/she came into existence: to serve God and to be saved (*Exercises* 175-177). All the three moments, believed Rahner, are inseparable. Actually, the *Spiritual Exercises* are, according to him, a practical initiation in learning and fulfilling God’s single will in the daily events of life, an embodiment, *hic et nunc*, of God’s will in man’s daily activity.¹⁹

The Jesuit theologian particularly insists on the discerning of spirits or the spiritual discernment to be able to choose God’s will in an undelusive way. To discern spirits is an act of discernment between God’s Spirit and His angels and the many evil spirits that tempt the soul. Generally, according to Ignatius, thoughts are good when they are accompanied by peace and joy, when they cultivate and produce the good and respectively, thoughts are bad when they are accompanied by nervousness and cause uneasiness. God, His angels and

¹⁷ “In (Jerónimo) Nadal, the Rahner brothers found two formulae that they, and many Jesuits after them, took as epitomizing the distinctive charism of Ignatius: ‘finding God in all things’, and ‘contemplative in action’.” Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 69.

¹⁸ See Maier, “La Théologie des Exercices de Karl Rahner”, 547-548.

¹⁹ See K. Rahner, “Die Ignatianische Logik der existentiellen Erkenntnis”, in *KRSW* 10, 387.

good thoughts comfort the soul, while the evil spirits push the soul to desolation (*Exercises* 329-336). However, there are also special circumstances when the evil angel can take the appearance of an angel of light and initially delude the soul with consolation to eventually push it to errancy and malice.

In his interpretation, Rahner aims to identify the ultimate foundation of discernment and, also, the “fundamental features of an Ignatian logic of existential ethics”.²⁰ For this, he consulted Ignatius of Loyola, from whom he learned that only “consolation without cause” is beyond any delusion, because only it comes solely from God (*Exercises* 336). This “consolation without a previous cause”, although it transgresses the “consciousness of the objective reality” (*Gegenstandsbewusstsein*), is, still, a state of conscious participation in God’s love, where the reflexive consciousness is not missing. This love “beyond any definite object” is actually the positive aspect of *sin causa precedente*, by which is actually called God Himself, apophatically speaking.²¹ Rahner therefore concludes that in God and in participating in Him, through love, we acquire the “consolation without cause”, which is the ultimate foundation of discernment.

“But consolation without cause is not only the obvious foundation for the discerning of spirits, but is also the ontological and logical foundation of a direct experience of God as an absolute and sacred mystery. It is an experience of transcendence because it is without sensorial representations. It takes place, therefore, in man’s deepest intimacy and is of spiritual nature”.²²

Embedded in man as “the supernatural existential” (*übernatürliches Existential*), the supernatural grace – as an event of God’s genuine self-communication to man and of the ascension of human transcendence to God – mediates the most intimate encounter of man with himself and with the divine Mystery. And the “signs” of this double meeting of man with God and with himself are peace, joy and consolation. The Ignatian mysticism conjoins, according to Rahner’s interpretation, not only the divine will and man’s will, but, also, the divine love and the human love. And the more profoundly one participates in the divine life, the more profoundly one discovers oneself. The

²⁰ Ibid., 409. About the foundation by Rahner of the existential ethics on the Ignatian spiritual exercises wrote B. Fraling: “Existentialethik im Zeichen der Exerzitieninterpretation”, in *Wagnis Theologie*, 61-81.

²¹ See Rahner, “Die Ignatianische Logik der existentiellen Erkenntnis”, 399. In the Ignatian existential logic, “consolación sin causa” acquires, according to Rahner, a similar function to “the first principles in the general Logic and in Ontology”. Juan Carlos Scannone, “Die Logik des Existentiellen und Geschichtlichen nach Karl Rahner”, in *Wagnis Theologie*, 86.

²² Maier, “La Théologie des Exercices de Karl Rahner”, 553.

perfect interpenetration between man and God, between the human will and the divine one, between the human love and the divine one is revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ.²³

As it is known, the *Spiritual Exercises* have Jesus' life in their centre. Three out of the four weeks the spiritual exercises last, the trainee contemplates Lord's life, death, resurrection and ascension. From this historical Jesus, mediated by the Gospel, received through faith and imaginatively contemplated in the *Spiritual Exercises*, started Rahner to develop the transcendental Christology. In the human transcendence is given the openness of the human spirit towards the world, the self and towards God, and this transcendence is attained in the historical Jesus Christ. In his Christology, the Jesuit theologian gave thought also to the human consciousness of Jesus, and, particularly, to the Holy Heart of the Lord, about which he wrote many articles between 1928-1981.²⁴ Faithful to Ignatius of Loyola, who had "something inherently almost archaic-archetypal", and starting from Jesus' Heart as from the "hearth" of the divine fire of everyday mysticism, Rahner always preached following Christ the Humble and poor and serving Him by serving the poor and suffering neighbour with whom He identifies Himself.²⁵

In 1978, the famous theologian resumed the topic of the immediate and direct experience of God by a stylistically bold work, titled *Rede des Ignatius von Loyola an einen Jesuiten von heute / Speech of Ignatius of Loyola to a Modern-Day Jesuit*²⁶, in which he systematically developed his own spiritual theology of Ignatian origin. This *Speech of Ignatius*, in which exegetes of the famous theologian glimpsed elements of his own spiritual biography, was deemed by Rahner himself his own spiritual testament.²⁷ Referring to this

²³ See Ingvild Røsok, "The kenosis of Christ revisited: the relational perspective of Karl Rahner", *Heythrop Journal* LVIII (2017), 59-60.

²⁴ Republished in KRSW 13: *Ignatianischer Geist. Schriften zu den Exerzitien und zur Spiritualität der Ordensgründer* (2006).

²⁵ See H. Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen. Eine Einführung in sein Leben und Denken* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1985), 50; Mgr. Peter Henrici, "Une théologie puisant à une source spirituelle commune: Ignace de Loyola", in H. Gagey, V. Holzer (eds.), *Balthasar, Rahner. Deux pensées en contraste* (Paris: Bayard, 2005), 24.

²⁶ KRSW 25, 299-329; K. Rahner, *Ignatius of Loyola Speaks* (South Bend, Indiana, 2013); K. Rahner, "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit", in P. Imhof (ed.), *Ignatius of Loyola* (London: Collins, 1979).

²⁷ See KRSW 25, 84. "Rahner characterized his own theology as an attempt to spell out the implications of the experience of the Holy Spirit that St. Ignatius wished to deepen and clarify through his *Spiritual Exercises*. All theology, Rahner asserted, should have a mystical dimension; it should be nourished by the experience of grace. Using this inner experience as a starting point, Rahner radically transformed the traditional theses of scholastic theology." (Avery Dulles S.J., "Jesuits and theology: yesterday and today", *Theological Studies* 52 (1991), 535)

work, Bernard Sesboüé believes that "it is not an exaggeration to say that Karl Rahner's most speculative thought is the theological thematization of the spiritual experience of encountering God, as it is proposed by Ignatius".²⁸

Open and full of joy, this Ignatian Rahner describes the direct, apophatic experience of God:

"I was convinced that I had encountered God. (...) All I am saying is this: I have experienced God, the nameless and unfathomable one, the silent and yet near one, in the trinity of his love for me. I have experienced God also and most especially beyond all concrete imagery: the one who when drawing near of his own accord and out of sheer grace cannot be confused with anything else. (...) I experienced the incomprehensibility of God so strangely and from the perspective of the godlessness of your own time where such godlessness merely eliminates the idols of a previous era that equated them in both harmless and terrible ways with the unfathomable God. (...) I have truly encountered God, the true and living one, the one who merits the name that extinguishes all other. (...) I have encountered God; I have experienced him".²⁹

Starting from this personal experience, Rahner was preoccupied to revive in the conscience of the increasingly secularized contemporary man the confidence that God has not died and that it may be "directly", "immediately" and convincingly experienced. To the modern man, who lives the drama of alienation from heaven and himself, Rahner proposes a living and very close God, Who is, certainly, beyond the human words about Him, words that are so poor, so deceptive and also so disappointing. His theology opposed the contemporary atheism and agnosticism, with the complete self-sufficiency of sciences, with the wretchedness and sterility of life without God.³⁰ This theology was orthopraxy at the same time, namely a deed of the Good Samaritan, who anoints deep wounds with oil and wine. The words of this Rahnerian Ignatius are, at the same time, the expression of ecstasy of the encounter with the Living and close God and of the agony of losing Him in human words, images and representations, cultivated, unfortunately, also by a certain kind of theology. Whereas Ignatius of Loyola was permanently concerned with helping the souls in their ascent to heaven, Rahner, as his disciple, endeavoured to help the modern man, as applicable, to regain, to keep or to deepen his faith. Certainly, the pastoral-missionary dimension of Rahner's theology does not originate in the abstract theological thinking, but in the personal, genuine experiencing God and His Ghost, in the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola.

²⁸ Sesboüé, "Spiritualité ignatienne et théologie", *Revue de Spiritualité Ignatienne* 115 (XXXVIII), 2 (2007), 33.

²⁹ KRSW 25, 301-302; Rahner, *Ignatius of Loyola Speaks*, 6-8.

³⁰ See Sesboüé, *Karl Rahner*, 39; Metz, "Apprendre à croire", 16-17.

In this Rahnerian *Speech*, Ignatius speaks to the contemporary Jesuits also about obedience and about service in the Church.³¹ The way Ignatius of Loyola understood to serve the Church was a model to be followed for the German theologian. Both of them openly and repeatedly declared their loyalty to the Church and its hierarchy. But, despite this loyalty, both suffered due to the ecclesiastical apparatus. Ignatius of Loyola, Rahner reminds, had difficulties with the Inquisition six times. The Jesuit monk was given a special “attention” by the Vatican for more than a decade, with even a partial ban on his writing and speaking³², particularly because he had expressed a categorical opposition against the proclamation of the dogma of the Bodily Assumption into Heaven of the Holy Virgin.³³

Through Ignatius’ mouth, Rahner stated he wished to serve the Church his entire life, as he was animated by *sentire cum Ecclesia*, but by this he understood serving God first, and only afterwards serving an institution. For him, to love the Church is not the first and the last reality of his “existence”, but a secondary fact, as experiencing God in Christ is the ultimate foundation of his faith. He took the freedom to maintain a critical relationship³⁴ with the official Church, being sure that the Church is not confined to its magisterium and that also the critical exercise reveals a genuine ecclesial³⁵ specific feature, a “redemptive” dimension. For Rahner, the intense and intimate relationship with Christ and listening to his own conscience as a priest and monk meant more than the obedience to the hierarchy. As the Church is called to point beyond itself, to the kingdom of God and to the living man.³⁶ As a matter of fact, Rahner remained faithful till the end of his life to his youth belief according to which “the Church is for the man, and not the man for the Church”, as man becomes eternal, and not the Church.

³¹ On the ecclesial obedience in Rahner’s life and work wrote Udo Bentz in detail in his excellent monograph *Jetzt ist noch Kirche* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2008), 351-510.

³² See KRSW 25, 116; See also Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen*, 110, 116.

³³ In KRSW 9, XLIV-XLVII a letter of Hugo from Rome to Karl Rahner was published on February 18, 1955, from which there results the state of irritation and depression in which was the famous theologian due to the “Roman practices”.

³⁴ See Imhof, Biallowons, “Vorwort”, in *Bilder eines Lebens*, 6.

³⁵ See Sesboüé, *Karl Rahner*, 55.

³⁶ See Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen*, 51.

³⁷ Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, 238.

³⁸ Rahner’s entire contribution to the Jesuit spirituality and theology was reunited in KRSW 13: *Ignatianischer Geist* (2006) and KRSW 25: *Erneuerung des Ordenslebens* (2008). For more details about this contribution, see also Michel Fédou, “Préface”, in K. Rahner, *L’esprit ignatien. Écrits sur les Exercices et sur la spiritualité du fondateur de l’Ordre*, Œuvres 13, sous la direction de M. Fédou (Paris: Cerf, 2016), 7-21.

Philip Endean, the author of a profound analysis of Ignatius of Loyola's influence on Karl Rahner, pointed out that the Ignatian spirituality offered to the German theologian the necessary resources to the renewal of the Catholic theology.³⁷ Living in the Society of Jesus like in another family, Rahner preoccupied himself, out of gratitude, to also leave it a legacy. His writings of spirituality and Jesuit theology³⁸ were the renovating heritage he left to the Order that hosted him and fed his soul his entire life. Fr. Kolvenbach, one of the Generals of the Jesuit Order, stated:

"The significance of Father Karl Rahner for the Church ministry and for the society is definitely unique. I hope that his influence will continue to mark the Society of Jesus a long time from now on. In this respect, I do not think so much to the use of his dogmatic method, but, more significantly, to an influence on the others by what he undertook for the renewal of the spiritual life and for strengthening the Church. He did that by a constructive criticism, which highlighted the expertise he had acquired through hard work, carried out in silence".³⁹

3. The Holy Fathers: Fountains of Living Water

Simultaneously with his concerns in the field of spirituality and Ignatian theologian, Karl Rahner was attracted by the spirituality and theology of the Holy Fathers and generally of mysticism. As early as the first year of his theological studies he made a reading list which comprised, among others, the following texts of the Church Fathers: the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch, The Shepherd of Hermas, Polycarp, St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher, The Epistle of Barnabas, the Acts of the martyrs of the 2nd century, *The Muratorian Fragment*, St. Irenaeus of Lyon (*Adversus haereses* and *Demonstratio apostolicae Praedicationis*), then Tertullian and St. Clement of Alexandria with "Opera omnia", St. John Chrysostom (*On the priesthood*), St. Gregory of Nyssa (*On prayer*), Blessed Augustine (*On predestination* and *De dono perseverantiae*) and Apponius (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*). In the period of his theological studies also he was particularly concerned with repentance and conversion, reading a rich patristic literature on these topics, but, especially, Origen and Augustine. He continued to be interested in spirituality and spiritual theology, reading, as Karl Neufeld's noted: Ruysbroeck, Seuse, John of the Cross, Pascal, Surin, Scupoli, Colombiere, Newman, Soloviev, Gaudier, Ludovic de Granada,

³⁹ Imhof, Biallowons, "Forwort", in *Bilder eines Lebens*, 6.

Francis of Sales.⁴⁰ In the period of his Jesuit training he read “high spiritual literature quite a lot” and studied not only the Ignatian spirituality, but also that of Teresa of Avila or of John of the Cross.⁴¹

But Rahner not only read and was edified by the spirituality and theology of the Church Fathers, but was also a genuine hermeneute of their writings. The first contribution to Karl Rahner’s patristic exegesis – “Le début d’une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène” – was published in *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique*, in 1932, while he was still a Jesuit student at Valkenburg. In 1933, he published another study on the spiritual senses in the Middle Ages, especially with Bonaventura, and another on the spiritual doctrine of Evagrius of Pontus. The following year he explained in another article, the meanings of the notion of “ecstasy” with Bonaventura.⁴²

The Jesuit theologian’s preoccupation for the spiritual senses is, actually, a natural search for the transcendental data of the subject, with the aid of which God’s presence in the world can be perceived. The young theologian tried to explain by these kind of studies – in keeping with the Ignatian spirituality – how transcendental knowledge and experience is possible by using the spiritual senses, how these senses of the spirit present in the world (*Geist in Welt*), in history, allow experiencing and knowing the Supreme Reality.⁴³

Like Urs von Balthasar, Rahner granted a special attention to Origene, both being contributors to the rehabilitation of the famous Alexandrian by substantial studies. In addition to the study on the spiritual senses, Rahner wrote also studies about Jesus’ Heart and the repentance with Origen.⁴⁴ Two of the studies of the Jesuit theologian reveal intense and long lasting interests in the patristic theology and spirituality: ‘*E latere Christi*’: *Der Ursprung der Kirche als zweiter Eva aus der Seite Christi des zweiten Adam. Eine Untersuchung über den typologischen Sinn von Joh 19, 34* / ‘*E latere Christi*’:

⁴⁰ Karl Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner. Eine Biographie* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1994), 98-99.

⁴¹ KRSW 31, 183.

⁴² “La doctrine des ‘sens spirituels’ au Moyen-Age: En particulier chez St-Bonaventure”, *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 14 (1933), 263-299; KRSW 1, 82-147; “Die geistliche Lehre des Evagrius Ponticus”, *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik* 8 (1933), 21-38; KRSW 1, 66-81; “Der Begriff der *ecstasis* bei Bonaventura”, *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik* 9 (1934), 1-19; KRSW 1, 148-163.

⁴³ See K. Neufeld, “Ordensexistenz”, in A. Raffelt (ed.), *Karl Rahner in Erinnerung* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1994), 33.

⁴⁴ K. Rahner, “«Coeur de Jésus» chez Origène?”, *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 15 (1934), 171-174; KRSW 1, 164-169; Idem, “La doctrine d’Origène sur la Pénitence”, *Recherches de science religieuse* 37 (1950), 47-97, 252-286, 422-456; KRSW 11, 80-190. For more details on Rahner’s interpretation on Origene, see M. Fédou, “Karl Rahner et Hans Urs von Balthasar lecteurs et interprètes des Pères”, in *Balthasar, Rahner*, 148-159.

Church origin, as a second Eve, from the rib of Christ, the second Adam. A research on the typological meaning of the text of John 19, 34 (1936) and, particularly, *Ascese und Mystik in der Väterzeit / Asceticism and mysticism in the Fathers' era* (1939).⁴⁵ *E latere Christi* is the doctoral dissertation on theology of young Rahner, successfully defended at the Faculty of Theology of Innsbruck, at the end of year 1936, and unpublished until 1999, when it was included in *Sämtliche Werke*.⁴⁶

Using a diachronic account and a pluridisciplinary methodology, that combined exegesis, patrology and dogmatics, Rahner presented the origin of the Church in the bleeding side of the Crucified Christ. In the interpretation he gave to the biblical text – “But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water” (John 19, 34) – he separates from the tridentine perspective, according to which the Church was juridically founded on the Cross or on a founding word of Jesus, interpreting John’s metaphor of the pierced side, of which came out blood and water, in the interpretation offered particularly by Origen, Evagrius of Pontus and Bonaventure.⁴⁷ In this interpretation, life that came out of the pierced side of the Lord, was extended in mankind through the vivifying work of the Holy Spirit, present both in the Mystery of Baptism as a mystery of the incorporation in Christ and in the Church, as well as in the Mystery of Eucharist, as a Mystery of the mystical union with Christ. Bride of the Lord, the Church is the mother of all the people, the second Eve from the second Adam.⁴⁸ The birth of the Church from the side of the Crucified Christ was prefigured by Eve’s emergence from Adam’s rib, and the water and blood that came out from the Lord’s side, are “actual symbols” of the Baptism and Eucharist. Through these symbols, Christ’s life is mystically transferred into our life, thus being possible the sacramental

⁴⁵ Both writings were published in *KRSW 3: Spiritualität und Theologie der Kirchenväter* (1999).

⁴⁶ See *KRSW 3*, 1-84. On the genesis of this work, see *Ibid.*, XVII- XLIII; Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner*, 130-137; Vorgrimler, *Karl Rahner verstehen*, 83-85. Preceded by an introduction, the work contains five chapters: 1. “The biblical (Johannine and pauline) grounding”; 2. “The patristic literature until the middle of the third century”; 3. “The first exceptional witnesses of the 3rd century”; 4. “From the flowering period of the patristic literature up to the twilight of the patristic period”; 5. “The middle and modern ages”. Remembering the genesis of this work, Karl Rahner did not hesitate to qualify it “petty, miserable, but sufficient, according to the norms of that time” (*KRSW 25*, 6). His brother Hugo enumerated this work among the writings “about which we laugh” and which are a part of “the pre-history of our science” (H. Rahner, “Eucharisticon Fraternitas”, in *Gott in Welt*, 896).

⁴⁷ See Andreas R. Batlogg, “Kirche als Gegenwart Christi: Die theologische Dissertation”, in *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners: Quellen, Entwicklungen, Perspektiven* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 2003), 49-50; Günter Wassilowsky, “Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie”, in *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners*, 227.

⁴⁸ See *KRSW 3*, 9.

union of man-bride with God-his bridegroom. For the Christians of the early Church, the pierced side of the Lord was “the sign of their salvation, of all grace and power, up to martyrdom”, “a fountain of life, which flows through the Baptism and unites them themselves with Christ”, the spring well of Christ’s blood which they drink in the Eucharist.⁴⁹

The Jesuit theologian suggests that it is possible and desirable to correlate the origin of the Church in the pierced side of the Lord with the patristic piety to Jesus’ heart and, implicitly, the patristic spirituality with the Ignatian spirituality. In fact, Urs von Balthasar made the remark that Rahner “was a great defender of Church’s origin in Christ’s side and through this of Jesus’ heart cult’ and that ‘here would be the actual centre for him’”.⁵⁰

Initially published in French, with the title *La Spiritualité des premiers siècles chrétiens*, and signed by the famous French patrologist Marcel Viller, *Asceticism and mysticism in Father’s era*⁵¹ is the work of the French patrologist “freely processed” by Rahner and published in 1939, under the signature of the two.⁵² In the “Foreword”, the German theologian noted that although the topic of asceticism and mysticism with the Church Fathers occupies a central place in the history of Christian spirituality, theology of German language had not benefitted till then from such a book and, that is why, it came to fill a great gap and to meet a great expectation.⁵³

The authors of these patristic syntheses place perfection at the centre of their analysis, its meaning and the way it can be acquired according to the biblical writers, to the testimonies of martyrs, of the Church Fathers, of the great ascetics and scholar-monks. In the last two chapters of the work (11 and 12) are also set forth the ways and practices (prayer, devoutness and spiritual exercises) the laymen should pursue in order to acquire holiness.

According to the biblical authors, perfection means: a state of complete humility, of self- denial, of love for our neighbours, the state arisen in the soul by the “transparency, simplicity and sincerity” of children (Matthew); the union of man with Jesus and, through Him, with the Father (John); to feel like Christ, to

⁴⁹ See Ibid., 82-83.

⁵⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula ou l’épreuve décisive* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1968), 86.

⁵¹ Beside the introduction, general bibliography and the table of contents, the volume has 12 chapters: 1. “The New Testament and the first Christian writers”; 2. “The Martyrdom”; 3. “Chastity”; 4. “The academic piety of the 3rd century”; 5. “Monasticism in the East. The founders of the Egyptian monasticism”; 6. “The great cappadocians of the 4th century”; 7. “Propagation of monasticism in Palestine and Sinai”; 8. “The latin monasticism”; 9. “The Greek mystics of the 5th-7th centuries”; 10. “From Augustine to Gregory the Great”; 11. “Holiness in the world”; 12. “Prayer, devoutness and spiritual exercises”. (KRSW 3, VII-X)

⁵² With respect to Rahner’s contribution to the German edition of the book, see Ibid., 125-128.

⁵³ See Ibid., 125.

live Christ's life in your life, to incorporate yourself into Christ through the Baptism and to be one with Him (Paul). Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, dead as a martyr in Rome, wrote that the sign of perfection is the union with Christ through the martyric death and through Eucharist respectively. After the end of the anti-Christian persecution, monasticism has been perceived as a bloodless martyrdom, that can entail holiness. For Anthony the Great, perfection is the return to the original state of our nature, to its original beauty and purity, possible, however, only by mastering passions, by defeating sins and the devil. In line with Origen, Evagrius of Pontus is the father of an entire learned spiritual tradition (that includes Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor), according to which spiritual life includes active life and contemplative or gnostic life. At its peak, contemplative life is crowned with the contemplation of the Holy Trinity, the ultimate goal of spiritual life. But gnosis – as a vision of God and communion with the divine love – can only be acquired by a purification of passions and through pure prayer, as it is a gift of the grace bestowed by Christ on the soul. For Augustine, perfection – as an ideal of Christian life – is the fruit of love, of such a love for Christ that defeats death, as martyrs show us. The martyric death is the sign that the perfect Christian gets to feel that “wild” love for God that is not just an ecstatic self-effacement, but also self-sacrifice, self-consuming whole burnt offering for the loved One.⁵⁴

At the end of the book, the authors confess that although it does not offer answers to all the issues raised to the Christian Asceticism and Mysticism by the Christian experience of the contemporary world,

“The Spiritual teaching of the Church Fathers can feed our own life in the Spirit. (...) In a community rooted in tradition, as the Church, the Fathers permanently remain a never-fading force for the present, fresh springs from which it takes its own power, the teachers we should ask. (...) A thorough study of the writings of the first century could promote the idea of reunification in the same religion and in the same devotion – the ultimate goal of unity that Christ wished so much, the achievement of which being also our sacred duty”.⁵⁵

Conclusion

A Jesuit monk trained at the school of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola and of the Church Fathers' spirituality – following the path of the creative and innovating faithfulness – Rahner intended to point out that the

⁵⁴ See Ibid., 140-152, 160, 200-202, 213-214, 330-332, 341-342.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 389-390.

intense spiritual experience of the past has the power to revive the increasingly secularized life of contemporary Christianity. He did that through many meditations and spiritual exercises – particularly in the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola – but also through his many articles and pious books which he would recommend to anyone who wished to discover the core of his theology, in particular, and generally of the Christian theology. His most important concern was, therefore, to “help the souls” of his contemporaries to rediscover the path of faith and of the Christian experience, in a time when “the absence of mystery was officially enthroned” and when even some theologians would speak about “God’s death”. It has been rightly noted that Rahner’s most speculative and most spiritual thinking is rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, in whom he saw “a leading existentialist”. If the existentialism integrated the most concrete experience with the profoundly speculative thought, then Rahner himself may be perceived as a “leading existentialist”, sent to rediscover the spiritual dimension of everyday life and the historical dimension of Transcendence, to impart meaning on “recent man”’s (Roman Patapieviçi) life.

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